POST-PHOTOGRAPHY, OR ARE WE PAST PHOTOGRAPHY?

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The term *post-photography* appears somewhat obvious today, when photography and its practice have been so obviously transformed by computing and the World Wide Web. The screen is now the norm for viewing photographs, as digital transmission is already the dominant form of processing and distributing photographs. In this new environment, where photographic prints have become rare objects and photographs can instantly be seen worldwide, photography as we have known it since it was invented in the mid nineteenth century has changed beyond recognition, requiring a whole new set of conceptual tools to think about its meanings, uses and effects. Or has it? While some hail digital photography as a "new visual regime" (Rubinstein, Golding, and Fisher, 2013, p. 30), others dismiss the development as a "new techno-modernism" (Bate, 2015, p. 142). Which of these views is better suited to understanding photography today?

The question is not without consequence, apart from affecting what constitutes the very object of photographic studies (Bate, 2014). If it is true that photographic practice is not dependent on the definition of theoretical concepts to guide it, it is no less correct that concepts, especially those articulating perceived changes as novelty (new paradigm, new aesthetics) are greatly appealing to institutions and other formal or informal agents whose role is to disseminate photography, and who operate within a very competitive environment. If in this way concepts are easily absorbed and quickly fed back into the practice through exhibition themes, magazine features, or commercial and art prizes, that is, if theorization influences the practice itself, where do we stand in the post/photography debate?

In 1992, William J. Mitchell described in his book *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* what was the "beginning of a new era of artistic exploration" happening then, in the early 1990s, with the "computer-processed digital image supersed[ing] the image fixed on silver-based photographic emulsion" (p. 120). Emphatically, Mitchell proclaimed that in 1989, 150 years after it was born, "photography was dead … as was painting 150 years before" (p. 120). The main argument of the book was that digitisation brought about a reconfiguration of the relation between photography and truth that was seen as very much necessary within a nascent postmodern understanding of the world and our relation to it. Against what Mitchell describes as an essentially positivist medium, put to pseudo-scientific uses, digital photography appeared as the corrective which "has irrevocably subverted these certainties, forcing us to adopt a far more wary and more vigilant interpretive stance" (p. 225). Because "they are so easily distributed, copied, transformed, and recombined", digital images can subvert, Mitchell writes, the "rules [which] valorise photographs as uniquely reliable and transparent conveyors of visual information" (p. 223) and which have made communicating effectively through photography possible. Mitchell includes photography in all its guises in this "powerful orthodoxy of graphic communication" (p. 223) which is to be overturned, making no distinction between genres or contexts of production or reception: "photojournalism,

feature illustration, advertising photography, photo-illustrated fiction, the legal use of photographic evidence, the family snapshot, photographic portraiture, photo identification, medical imaging, and art photography" (p. 223).

The Reconfigured Eye appeared at a time of anxiety about *manipulation* in photography, exacerbated by the mutational powers of the photograph unleashed by burgeoning digital technology. In an article written originally in 1988 to accompany the exhibition "Digital Photography" held in San Francisco — an exhibition that aimed to reflect on three decades of computer images (Gillette, 1988) — Martha Rosler pointed that, in fact, "manipulation is integral to photography" (2004a, p. 262). In one sense, this is simply due to all the decisions involved around the framing, lenses, lighting, printing, and presentation required to make a photograph — the necessary 'practices of manipulation', that as Geoffrey Batchen puts it, imply that "the absence of truth is an inescapable fact of photographic life" (2009, p. 209). In another sense, this is because staging or the montage of negatives to create photographs, either with the aim of achieving more realism, or in order to deceive, have been employed, as Rosler (2004a) shows through abundant examples, since the inception of the medium.

Furthermore, the question is not indifferent to genre: concerns about manipulation "center on political, ethical, judicial, and other legal issues . . . as well as the broader ideological ramifications of how a culture deploys 'evidence' it has invested with the ability to bear ('objective') witness" (Rosler 2004a, p. 296). As Martin Lister (1995) pointed out in *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (another publication that emerged in response to the 'death of photography' provoked by the digital), "The historical use of photographs as 'evidence' . . . has long been in continual contradiction with other uses of photographs, particularly as art, and in advertising and corporate publicity" (p. 16). Lister goes further to state that the debate on opposing photography to digital imagery amounts to yet another instance in the long history of realist conceptions of photography, that privilege the technological means by which photographs are produced over the decisions, conventions, codes and contexts by which they are made and received. Those claiming a new post-photographic future are doing so by recasting photography in this narrow realist paradigm. But to pretend to define "the photographic" in technological terms, on the grounds of a "monolithic view of photography", Lister warns, is to provide "a restricted view of how photographic images come to have meaning" (pp. 9-10). Writing at the same time, for the catalogue of the exhibition *Photography after Photography: Memory and Representation in the Digital Age* (1996), Lev Manovich also identifies the same flaw in the reasoning of "techno-theorists" (Lister, p. 15), pointing that Mitchell (1995) has but conflated photography with the realist tradition, which "extends beyond photography … and at the same time accounts for just one of many photographic practices" (p. 62), reversing in effect the attempt to deduce culture from technology. Manovich refuses, however, to engage directly with the question of whether digital photography brings about a visual revolution that forces us to rethink representation.

In connection with the attack on the truth value of the photograph, the question that the proponents of post-photography raised was, more fundamentally, that of representation itself: if photographs can be made on the computer, then they do not need to be produced by something that is exterior to them, that is, they require no specific or causal referent in the world of objects and events. Lister (1995) distinguishes here between the recoding and the simulation of photographs digitally, and the production of virtual reality, whereby the former remains essentially within cultural continuity with the traditional uses and meanings of photography. Again, the challenge is to genres that refer to the external world such as reportage, photojournalism or documentary, where a "goofy" (Sekula, 1986, p. 160) understanding of the photograph as a manifestation of objective truth (at the same time that it is understood as subjective expression in the domain of art) troubles photography's capacity to refer to something other than itself. The post-photographic has but exacerbated this, by abandoning any interest in indexicality. In 'Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?' (2004b), an essay originally written in 1995, Rosler calls into question the viability of the documentary genre and of the photograph itself as a "fixed physical outcome of a mentality and a mode of production" (p. 211). Rosler acknowledges that the epistemological status of the image, that is, "its relationship to a phenomenologically present visual reality", has been effectively undermined, not only by digitisation but also by postmodernism, with the result that "the ability of any image of a visual field to convey lived experience, custom, tradition, or history" has been made problematic (2004b, p. 211). The consequence, Rosler concludes, is that the photograph "seems poised to mutate into just another, relatively ephemeral, aesthetic form and its maker an artist" (2004b, p. 211). This is the issue with the debate surrounding post-photography that Rosler wants to flag up: the demise of photographic representation means the demise of the possibility of social reference, thereby of the attempt to understand or explain through images things and events in the world. It is by all accounts an interesting position when considering that a significant part of Rosler's artwork consists in photomontage, through the appropriation of images in the mass media.

Fast forwarding the history of the notion of post-photography to the 2000s, by then Batchen was convicted that we "ha[d] already entered 'post-photography', that moment after but not yet beyond photography" (p. 109). The concept was employed, however, to refer to what were mostly practices that emphasized the materiality of the photograph, its "objectness" as Batchen puts it (p. 109), not its dematerialization. For Batchen, a "diminution of our collective faith in the photograph's indexical relationship to the real" (p. 109) had occurred, to which digitisation had concurred, if not played the leading role. What was left was the notion of the 'photographic', as "a practice dependent on the recirculation of already existing codes and images" (p. 109), that is largely porous to other media (sculpture, performance), "residing everywhere, but nowhere in particular" (p. 109). "Photography", Batchen proclaims, "has become 'pho-

tography' " (p. 111), the quotation marks signalling both the historicity and the (alleged) inadequacy of the word to describe the present status of the medium. Batchen gives several examples of this type of photographic work, all within the realm of art, the overview confirming Rosler's premonition that visual social reference was no longer on the agenda.

Post-photography as a wider phenomenon, encompassing more than digitisation, was perhaps most famously enunciated in the 2011 exhibition-cum-manifesto *From Here On* at the annual photography festival "Les Rencontres de la Photographie", in Arles, France. In the book that accompanies the exhibition, Joan Fontcuberta states that "post-photography is nothing more than photography adapted to our online life" (Chéroux 2013, p. 7), reflecting that the concept had already mutated to include the new realm of the "networked image" (Rubinstein, 2008), resulting from the merging of (digital) photography with the Internet. Acting as a curator for the "Mois de la Photo" biennial at Montreal, Canada in 2015, Fontcuberta addresses directly what he calls "the post-photographic condition", through a programme of exhibitions and a catalogue with essays theorizing this condition. Post-photography according to Fontcuberta (2015) is "not a style, movement or historical period", but a "transcendence" in that "it is what transcends or goes beyond photography", ontologically distinct in that it "introduces us to the dematerialized, pre-eminent image, consisting of disembodied information . . . transmitted and circulated in a frenetic, incessant flow", with the effect of "invit[ing] us to remove thought from our actions in relation to the image, launching us in a philosophical exercise that engages with the experience of our digital life" (unpaginated).

And such is the paradox that the development of Web 2.0 after 2002 has brought to the complexities already posed by digital photography: against the prediction that they would disappear, photographic images became instead more present than ever, as cameras were absorbed into phones and ever more mobile and ubiquitous devices, and the network spread to all areas of life. As Fred Ritchin (2008) put it, "photography as we have known it is both ending and enlarging" (p. 15). Reflecting this persistence of "photography after photography" (Kember, p. 70), the use of the prefix "post-" seems to have waned in the academic realm and post-photography increasingly is becoming a historical notion, referring to the early period after the appearance of the digital image (see for instance Lister, 2013, p. 3). Considering developments since then, the debate on the present condition of photography has to take into account, following David Bate (2014), not only "the centrality of the computer in the production and dissemination of the digital 'photographic' image", but also "the connections that are now so easily made for images to pass between computing devices" (p. 39). Is the networked digital image, Bate asks, "a radical transformation, a displacement of photography, or is it a continuation of the same by other means?" (p. 39).

The answer once again is proving divisive within the field of photographic studies. If it can be said that there is consensus around the idea that the new

omnipresence achieved by the photographic image requires renewed tools to understand its condition now, there is however disagreement about where to source these theoretical instruments, and to what extent they are the solution for the (alleged) theoretical lacuna. This is largely the position defended by several authors in the second edition of *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (Lister, 2013). Maintaining a moderate view that encompasses the understanding of photography, analogue or digital, as *photographies*, reflecting its multiple forms and uses as well as technological hybridity, and retaining indexicality "within strict critical limits", Lister acknowledges, however, that "the kind of visual, textual or semiotic analysis" employed so far in photography theory is "no longer adequate" to study the networked digital photograph (Lister, 2013, pp. 3 and 7). Technological changes have meant that the vast majority of photographic images today, independently of genre or institutional use, are transmitted, stored and shared as numeric data, and viewed on light emitting screens instead of physical prints. The effect is a dematerialisation of the photographic image that implies a reconfiguration both of its substrate base and of the phenomenological experience of looking at photographs, analogue and digital alike. On screen, photographs acquire not only duration (as screens can be switched on and off) but also an appearance of movement provoked by their existence in multiples, as strings, threads, sets, grids whereby "each image seems to nudge us toward another" (Lister, 2013, p. 8) in a seemingly endless flow. As Bate (2014) writes, "photographs are no longer yoked to the word (…) the viewing of images becomes like hearing a stream of verbal utterances" which may be complete or not, transforming the experience of the photograph from stasis to process and changing perception from "an objective de-coding process [into] sensory associations, an activity of 'thought', even when or where it appears to evade language" (p. 49). To Bate, this experience is producing new forms of subjectivity that are yet to be grasped so that "to begin to understand the effects of the Web on photography, we also have to look at the conduct of subjectivity" (2014, p. 50).

Focusing on the changes to the substrate base of photography, several authors argue instead for the need to study software and the algorithms which are its operative components, shifting the discussion to that of media and more broadly technology and its "affordances" (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2009). While rejecting the idea that we live now in a post-media age where the computer and its software have successfully simulated all previous physical media creating one single metamedium, Lister (2013) recognizes that the new algorithmic quality of photography and its extended apparatus (including the camera but also the "online organisations, social media sites, data-bases and post-production software where photographs are made, stored, organised, classified and shared", p. 13) add (and subtract) new capacities to the medium of photography and therefore require theoretical attention.

On the other side of the spectrum, claiming instead that a "radical transformation" of photography is precisely what has taken place, are those for whom

the "algorithmic image" breaks away from any secure relationship between the image and the world and as such is "on the verge of releasing itself from the burden of representation", the present moment characterised as a "beyond representation" stage (Rubinstein et al., p. 12). A position put forward most prominently by *On the Verge of Photography. Imaging Beyond Representation*, a collection of essays by diverse authors presenting the outcome of a wider research project aiming no less than to "re-think the entirety of the field" and "contribute to a redefinition of the foundations of the discipline" (Rubinstein et al., acknowledgments). Their main argument is that the digital-born image is composed of a field of data that has the appearance of an analogue photograph only due to convention. As data, images are no longer defined by their mode of recording or their geometric construction but by the algorithmic structure which gives them their particular appearance, which can be any (Hoelzl and Marie, p. 131). As Rubinstein puts it (Rubinstein et al., 2013), "when computers look at photographs they do not see aunt Helena, a sunset or a birthday cake [but] calculable information" (p. 31). This information is continually combined and recombined with other information circulating on the network (and more generally the computer) to produce new connections, changing from being a discrete unit to a fluid entity characterised instead by instantaneity, simultaneity, multiplicity and the indeterminacy that is the result of the agency of code itself. The meaning of this *softimage* (Hoelzl and Marie) is established "not through the procedure of representation but according to the manifold of relations to the other parts of the network" (Rubinstein et al., p. 37), which have a bearing on "each individual's reach into the world and her/his ability to realise plans and projects" (Rubinstein et al., p. 31).

In face of this redefinition of the photographic image in technological terms, it seems legitimate to question to what extent the realist paradigms advanced in the early post-photography era are once again being revived. In this sense, Bate (2015) argues that the "post-visual domain of metadata, of viral tags and algorithmic computing structures" echoes the dematerialisation of the object in conceptual art, with the effect of "dematerialis[ing] the representational image into abstraction" (p. 142). As he points out, in the field of art photography, where experimentation takes place, photographic images have begun to resemble abstract paintings, retreating into a "technological space" purified of social reference (Bate, 2015, p. 142), where post-photography repeats past models of vision explored in other media.

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